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AUTHOR Davidson, Betty M.; Taylor, Dianne L.
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ABSTRACT

This report is based on a study that examined the effect of changing principals during a restructuring process. Data were collected at two rural elementary schools in a midsouthern state that had participated in the Accelerated Schools Project. The project's effectiveness was threatened by frequent principal succession at both schools. The schools were in different districts: one school included grades 3 through 6, and the other, pre-K through second. An interview protocol of 10 items explored teachers' perceptions regarding the characteristics of the school prior to initiation of the accelerated schools process, and the effects that principal succession had on the process, including teacher leadership. A protocol of five items guided the principal interviews and investigated principals' perceptions about coming to a school already involved in a restructuring process, including what they found to be particularly easy and difficult about assuming the principalship at a school where teachers had been trained in leadership roles. The results suggest that strong teacher leadership can mitigate the effects of a bad fit, at least for a short time. At neither school did changes in principals destroy the restructuring process. However, a strong match between the principal and the school's culture is of utmost importance. (Contains 15 references.) (RJM)

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Examining Principal Succession and Teacher Leadership in School Restructuring

Betty M. Davidson
University of New Orleans

Dianne L. Taylor
Louisiana State University

CONTACT:
Dr. Betty Davidson
Department of Educational Leadership
Counseling and Foundations
UNO
New Orleans, LA 70148

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Examining Principal Succession and Teacher Leadership in School Restructuring

Betty M. Davidson, University of New Orleans
Dianne L. Taylor, Louisiana State University

School reform is fragile. Like most organizations, schools tend to resist change. This resistance can be overcome, however, when the model for reform provides a workable process for change, and when principal succession is infrequent. A reform effort is easily undermined when of either of these elements is weakened.

Our study involves two schools at which a proven model of school reform, the accelerated schools process, had been implemented. The effectiveness of the reform model was threatened by frequent principal succession at both schools. Nonetheless, the reforms were sustained. We examine the proposition that the teacher leadership which was developed at these schools through the accelerated schools process proved to be a viable tool for sustaining the reforms in the face of principal succession.

Creating and Sustaining School Reform

Below, we provide a framework for the study. To do so, we describe the accelerated schools process. We also discuss the literature related to both teacher leadership and principal succession

The Accelerated Schools Project

The Accelerated Schools Project is a comprehensive model of school reform, designed to improve schooling for children in at-risk communities. The standard

toward which all accelerated schools strive is the creation of a school to which the professional staff would eagerly to send their own children (Brunner & Hopfenberg, 1992). Integral to the process is building on identified strengths in the students, faculty, and staff. Said another way, instead of viewing "at-riskness" as a trait inherent in a child, the accelerated schools model posits that the child has been placed in an "at-risk situation." The ultimate goal is to mitigate the at-risk situation and prepare all students for the educational mainstream by providing enriched educational experiences, not unlike those experiences currently provided to children placed in programs for the gifted (Levin, 1996).

To accomplish this goal, the staff develops a shared set of values that are consciously brought into daily activities. A sense of trust is developed that encourages experimentation, discovery, and risk-taking. In addition, a culture is created that promotes the participation of all staff, including teachers (Hopfenberg, et al. 1993).

This participatory culture is maintained through a governance structure that involves committees, called cadres, on which all teachers serve. The cadres help shape major decisions affecting students and the instructional program. Cadre work is deliberate and relies on a systematic process to solve identified problems. For the process to work properly, the principal must use a facilitative leadership style. When

these elements are in place, every teacher at the school becomes actively involved in decision making, with some teachers developing into informal teacher leaders.

Teacher Leadership

One of the major changes proposed by early restructuring advocates was to bring teachers into leadership roles by involving them in decision making (see Carnegie, 1986). This change in role has been slow to take hold (Taylor & Bogotch, 1994). Indeed, as Wasley (1991) notes, even when individual teacher leaders emerge through special programs, their leadership role is limited to the program itself and does not influence decision making in other areas at the school.

The development of teacher leadership has been constrained by the fact that teachers do not always want to assume decision making responsibilities, as Weiss, Cambone, and Wyeth (1992) and Taylor and Tashakkori (1997) point out. The shared decision making process time consuming, and teachers often feel they are asked to decide trivial issues, such as the allocation of parking slots or use of copy machines (Kirby, 1992; Conley, Schmidle, & Shedd, 1988; Wohlstetter & Oden, 1992; Davidson, 1992).

As described above, the accelerated schools model avoids involving teachers in trivial decisions by focusing on issues related to long range goals established for the school by the teachers, themselves, the principal, and others. These decisions include a broad range of matters such as instructional innovations, ways of building students'

social skills, and methods for involving parents at the school. To enhance the effectiveness of teacher leadership, extensive training was provided to teachers and principals. Subsequent to the training, one way that teachers exercise the leadership is interviewing and recommending candidates for teaching vacancies. However, the support of district administrators is needed for teachers to participate in identifying a successor principal.

Principal Succession

Hallinger (1992) describes principals as "lynch-pins...in...educational change" (p. 1). Through their use of positional authority, principals can function as the initiators or inhibitors of change (Driver & Levin, 1997). When a principal leaves a school after initiating a restructuring effort, the changes fade quickly unless the successor principal supports the changes. However, when a principal uses a restructuring effort to build teacher leadership, and when teachers are included in the selection of a successor principal, the changes are likely to be sustained.

Principal succession occurs for a number of reasons. Among the most common are promotion to a central office position and a district philosophy that schools do best when principal changes are frequent. Ogawa (1995) and Miskel and Cosgrove (1985) point out that the research provides mixed support for this philosophy. They suggest that changing leaders may even have deleterious effects on organizational performance. At best, they assert, a frequent change of leaders is disruptive.

On the other hand, there is widely held belief that bringing a new administrator into an organization experiencing performance difficulties will solve the problems. Some studies (Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985) indicate that administrator changes do produce positive results, particularly when the new leader was chosen because of dissimilarity with the other members of the school. Nonetheless, Miskel and Cosgrove note that "whether chosen for similarities or differences, careful socialization permits an outsider to harmonize well in a new organization" (p. 91). Ogawa (1995) makes a similar point, noting that whether or not principal succession leads to beneficial results may lie in the "fit" between the administrator and the organizational members. He notes that "when successors fail to adhere to organizational norms, conflict and tension arise" (p. 368); however, "when successors behave in ways that reveal their concern and expertise, subordinates respond favorably" (p. 368).

Miskel and Cosgrove (1985) observe that selection practices also have an impact. They note that decisions regarding principal selection are usually made by top level administrators, including the superintendent, senior administrators, and long-term principals (p. 90). Miskel and Cosgrove do not include faculty at the affected school among the decision makers. Such an oversight has important consequences for a school in the midst of a reform process. In our study, we combine

an examination of the development of teacher leaders at two accelerated schools with an analysis of the impact of principal succession on the success of the reform effort.

Methods

Our study examines the effect of changing principals on a restructuring process. Data were collected at two rural elementary schools in a mid-south state that had participated in the Accelerated Schools Project. The schools were in different districts. One school, Truman Elementary School, is comprised of grades three through six, with approximately 89% of the students in the free/reduced lunch program. Truman had participated as an accelerated school for 4 years when these data were collected, and had had three principals during that time. Langford Primary School, the other school, houses grades pre-kindergarten through second. Approximately 98% of the students on free/reduced lunch. Langford had participated as an accelerated school for 6 years at the time these data were collected. During those years, a succession of four principals was appointed to the school.

The research design involved a case study methodology (Yin, 1989). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers and principals at both schools. Interviews were also held with those teachers who had been at the school continuously during the time the school was involved with accelerated schools, and the year prior. Thus, teacher informants had knowledge both of the school prior to initiation of the accelerated schools process and of the

effects of the changes in principalship. The current principal at Truman was interviewed, as were three of the four principals at Langford. This purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 1990) resulted in 24 informants, 20 of whom were teachers.

An interview protocol of 10 items explored teachers' perceptions regarding the characteristics of the school prior to initiation of the accelerated schools process, and the effects changing principals had on the process, including teacher leadership. A protocol of five items guided the principal interviews and investigated principals' perceptions about coming to a school already involved in a restructuring process, and what they found to be particularly easy and difficult about assuming the principalship at a school where teachers had been trained in leadership roles.

Findings

Truman Elementary School

Setting. Truman Elementary School is located in a rural district comprised of affluent communities and areas of extreme poverty. The 231 students at Truman come from low-SES families. Prior to the implementation of the accelerated schools process, Truman had the reputation as one of the worst schools in the district, according to teachers at the school. The professional staff of Truman includes 14 teachers, a guidance counselor, and a physical education/conflict resolution teacher. A core group of teachers has been at the school for twelve years.

Principal Succession. The accelerated schools process came to Truman the year Principal Henry Adams was on leave. Adams, who had been principal of Truman in 1984, was described by teachers as "a dictator," who ran the school in a "very traditional" way. For example, one teacher noted,

> It was expected that there would be no noise in the classroom, no noise in the hall, straight rows. The page you were working on was written in your lesson plan book.

Despite changes in student attitudes over the years that Adams was principal, he remained steadfast in his management approach. The result was chronic student discipline problems and low teacher morale. When teachers suggested ways things could be done differently, Adams's response was, "This is the way I do things. If you don't like it, go." As a consequence, "the teachers did what they were told," and morale worsened.

In the spring of 1994, a group of frustrated teachers met with a district supervisor to discuss problems facing the school. Knowing that Adams would be on leave the following school year, the supervisor suggested that the teachers investigate the accelerated schools model. Convinced that the model would work at Truman, the faculty voted to adopt it.

The superintendent, aware of the restructuring about to begin at Truman, appointed Marilyn Vincent as interim principal, and informed her of the faculty

decision to adopt the accelerated schools process. According to the teachers, Vincent "immediately began to consider our opinions." One teacher remembered,

> She began early developing a rapport with the teachers. We met in the summer at school. Everyone was excited about something new. She got everybody involved.

Another teacher agreed, stating,

> It was the first time we felt like we could solve something instead of sitting around and griping about it. From the very first, things started getting really positive. We were appreciated and valued more for our input.

This smooth start was facilitated by Vincent electing to take two teachers with her to a training session for accelerated schools. These three, in turn, trained the rest of the faculty prior to the opening of school.

With the support of Vincent, the faculty worked hard to implement the accelerated schools process. One of the unexpected difficulties was that

> some of us had been told what to do for so long, that when we had the freedom to do what we really wanted to do, we didn't know what to do.

However, Vincent guided the faculty through this difficulty, listening to their concerns, but reaffirming that they were to make the decision. Although one teacher recalled that "the freedom to make decisions was extremely scary," teachers felt that "we moved mountains that first year. And, we gained a lot of respect." In fact,

Truman Elementary was no longer seen as the worst school in the district. Instead, a waiting list formed of students who parents wanted them to attend the school.

The accelerated schools process gained a firm hold and enough momentum during that year to sustain the process through the upcoming year when Adams returned from leave. The teachers were proud of the accomplishments made and enjoyed their new role as decision makers. Upon his return, Adams discovered that the

> school was a totally different place. It looked 100% better. Everybody was happy, and the kids did a lot better.

Teachers were determined not to loose what they had developed. When teachers proposed solutions that Adams opposed, the mantra was, "stick together as a faculty and say 'This is the way we were doing it last year.'" Moreover, the teachers understood that Adams

> would be silly not to go ahead with it. He saw that it was working. Really, it was a lot less work for him because a lot more of the responsibilities were delegated.

Although teachers' role as decision makers was blunted by Adams, to his credit, he did not pose serious obstacles to thwart the restructuring process. Instead, he adopted a hands-off approach that enabled the process to continue, and at the end of that school year, retired from education.

Determined to see the school continue to move forward after Adams left, several teachers met with the superintendent to discuss potential candidates for principal. After much discussion among the teachers and informal interviews with the candidates, the faculty settled on Wanda Sullivan, one of the individuals suggested by the superintendent. The superintendent challenged the teachers to persuade Sullivan to accept the position.

Sullivan had been in a district office position and had turned down an offer to be principal at Truman while Adams was on leave. Her reasons were "the reputation of the school," and her wish to return to a teaching position. In fact, she became a fourth grade teacher in a magnet school, a position she held when the teachers from Truman began courting her for the principalship.

The teachers were successful in their efforts, and Sullivan accepted the position. She was introduced to the accelerated schools process by the faculty who supplied her with reading materials. Because of her limited knowledge about the reform process underway, Sullivan spent the first year getting on the job training. Her enthusiasm was apparent, prompting one teacher to say,

> she wants to know everything that is going on and wants to be involved in everything. She also did not want to get in the way of what we were supposed to be doing, but she wanted to make sure that she was holding up her end of the deal. She encouraged us to keep on.

Working with Sullivan during that year validated the teachers' selection of the successor principal. She supported staff collaboration, promoted innovative student learning activities, provided resources, interacted with students, and supported the accelerated schools model. Sullivan's skills and experience were well matched with the needs of the school.

Langford Primary School

Setting. Langford Primary School is located in a progressive public school district that provides comparatively high salaries and good working conditions. The teaching staff at the school includes 25 classroom teachers, and a number of support staff. The 440 students come from low-SES families.

Prior to implementation of the accelerated schools process, Langford was a dysfunctional school that had received a mix of students and teachers from other schools through a district reorganization. These other schools served communities that were sometimes bitter rivals. The bureaucratic leadership style of the principal accentuated divisions among faculty. Like the teachers at Truman, Langford teachers described the principal as "dictatorial." In the midst of these struggles, a new principal was appointed to Langford.

Principal Succession. When Lincoln Russell came to Langford, he was knowledgeable about reform models being advocated nationally, including the accelerated schools. He put together a team, including a group of teachers, to be

trained in the accelerated schools process. As occurred at Truman, this core group trained the rest of the faculty. Under Russell's facilitative leadership, the faculty began to resolve problems at the school. They devoted great effort that year to overcoming schisms; and experimentation with participatory decision making was ultimately a success. Teachers found the improvements exciting and invigorating. Before the school year ended, Russell was appointed to a district office position, and district administrators selected Roberta Fredrick as the successor principal. Fortuitously, the choice was an excellent match, and progress toward reform continued at Langford.

The teachers who were interviewed agreed that it was under Fredrick's leadership that the school reform process really took hold. She willingly dedicating the time needed to make the reforms work, and like Russell, used facilitative leadership skills adroitly. Teachers described Fredrick as

> empowering. [She] allowed you to take risks on things that went on within your classroom as long as it was within the boundaries of the district philosophy.

The impact teachers' involvement in decision making was having on instruction was gratifying, prompting comments such as

> We were able to really make some significant teaching changes.

and

> You could see results. The way we were teaching, the kids were blooming. They were happy. We were happy.

Fredrick and the faculty built Langford into a highly successful school serving low income students. The school attracted educators from within and outside of the state to learn the secrets of their success. Teachers were pleased with their progress, and attributed much of what they had achieved to the leadership skills of Fredrick and Russell, who actively encouraged the cadres in their work to make the school a better place for children. At the end of Fredrick's third year, Fredrick also accepted a district office position. District administrators again selected the successor principal, appointing Gayle Young.

Young had held a variety of positions successfully during her 27 years with the district, including 12 years at Langford as teacher and counselor. Her experience appeared to make her a perfect fit for Langford, however, the selection proved to be a mismatch. In retrospect, Young recognized the poor fit, and when asked what was most difficult about being appointed principal at a school where a reform process was well underway, she stated that

> identifying topics that were to be decided solely by administration and topics that were to go through the cadres [was the most difficult]. The teachers have definitely been empowered to the point that a principal's role is more of a team member.

In saying this, Young exposed both her traditional philosophy of school leadership and the resulting lack of fit between her leadership approach and that required of a principal at a school where teacher leadership was successful.

As the year wore on, teachers became frustrated and the progress made when Fredrick was principal eroded. Cadres continued to develop remedies for problems that arose, but their decisions were seldom implemented. Spirits lagged and school reform was stymied. One teacher summed up the situation this way.

> I don't think Gayle fully understood the process, and that made it difficult on us. If we would have had more of a facilitator—someone who knew the techniques—it would have gone smoother.

Young's confusion about what decisions were appropriately in the purview of the cadres, and her ignorance about the including teachers in the decision making process created a situation in which teachers were asked to decide issues without the benefit of the process they had learned to use so effectively and without the benefit of adequate information. According to one teacher,

> Young was trying to get us to make more decisions than I think we should have been making -- putting the responsibility on us for some things. And then, [when things didn't work] it would always go back to 'it was our fault.'

By the end of the year, district administrators recognized the mismatch. Shortly after school closed for the year, Young was transferred to another school and

Betsy Miller assumed the principalship of Langford. Again, faculty input was not solicited, and again the match was faulty.

As might be expected, the appointment of the fourth principal was met with mixed emotions by the Langford faculty. Miller, however, not only voiced support for the process, but also asserted that she was eager to regain the reputation the school had established under Fredrick. The teachers were hopeful that this most recent change in principalship would be a good match. As the year unfolded, teachers felt the backslide that had been experienced the preceding year was giving way to progress once again.

While the faculty's concerns about yet another change in the principalship were being mitigated, Miller, herself, had a few reservations about assuming the role of principal in a school implementing a reform model. She related that the "attitude of the teachers" was the hardest thing she encountered when she arrived at the school, explaining

> They knew it all, and they also had this attitude that because they were an accelerated school, they were different from every other school in this district. So that was a difficult hurdle. I really found it difficult to get to know the faculty, for them to get to know me, and for us to get on the same wave length as far as expectations for this year—what we hoped to accomplish.

Slowly, a sense of trust was built. As Miller described it,

> I think they started to understand that I saw them as very intelligent, creative, good strong teachers. They saw that I really loved their children. Apparently, I came on pretty strong, and they didn't know quite how to take that.

Although progress was made, there were setbacks as well. Miller informed the teachers that district developed guidelines were to be followed in addressing issues at the school, supplanting the process teachers had used effectively through the accelerated schools program. Miller was aware of the problem and noted,

> That probably put [the accelerated schools process] pretty much on the side. I think that does bother those who have been here the longest and have worked from the very start with the accelerated schools. They don't feel that they have the time to do the inquiry that they would like to be doing. I think that they see what we do as jumping to solutions which is directly contrary to the accelerated schools process. I believe there is some resentment there and I'm not quite sure how to resolve that.

Miller was aware that the change in principals at the school had been a great stress to the faculty. Nonetheless, school operations ran more smoothly with Miller. Though the school did not achieve the success that had occurred with Fredrick, the teachers were supportive of Miller's leadership.

Conclusions

At Langford and Truman, the restructuring process began smoothly. Teachers at both schools expressed enthusiasm for the progress made during the initial year. At both schools, the principal who helped launch the restructuring process left after the initial year to accept a position at central office.

At Langford, the central office appointed a principal who was very supportive of the accelerated schools process. Indeed, it was through her leadership that teacher leadership took hold and the school became a show place to which educators from across the state and elsewhere flocked. In fact, the school was asked to host so many visitors that a calendar had to be made to restrict visitors to one group per day. After three years, this principal moved to a central office position. Two principals, both of whom were appointed by the superintendent and other central office administrators, followed her. Teachers who had been trained in decision making, were not included in the selection process. Both principals proved to be mismatches and teacher frustration mounted as successes achieved in former years were stymied.

The constant change of principals had a dampening effect on the restructuring process. Indeed, the last two principals appointed to the school felt a stronger allegiance to central office than to sustaining the restructuring process. Had it not

been for the teacher leaders developed under the second principal, restructuring at Langford would have given way to the agenda of the new principals. This did not happen. Teacher leadership maintained a focus on the goals and processes established when the restructuring process began.

At Truman, the scenario differed in details, but was the same in effect. After a successful first year with an interim principal, the long time principal of the school returned from sabbatical leave. He was surprised by the rise in teacher leadership that had developed during his leave, which conflicted with his traditional conceptions of the role of principals and teachers. Nonetheless, the improvements to the school were obvious, and, he decided to leave the school at the conclusion of the academic year. During that year, he neither supported nor undermined the restructuring that had taken place.

Teachers, who had seen their school change from having one of the worst reputations to one of the best, were eager to see a new principal appointed who would support the restructuring process. A small group of teachers assumed the responsibility of finding the successor principal who would be the correct fit for the school. They enlisted the support of the superintendent and compiled a list of eligible candidates. After informal interviews with potential candidates, the teachers

submitted a name to the superintendent of one they thought had the leadership skills needed. This candidate was appointed to the school.

Educational Importance

Although prior work emphasized the importance of "fit" between a new principal and a restructuring process (Ogawa, 1995), our study indicates that strong teacher leadership can mitigate the effects of a bad fit, at least for a short period of time. The two schools studied here experienced a series of principals while a restructuring process was underway. At neither school did these changes in principals destroy the process. Teachers at both schools explained that their success in sustaining the restructuring effort was because of teacher leadership.

A strong match between the principal and the school characteristics is of utmost importance. The successful match between Sullivan at Truman is what school districts should strive to achieve in all of their schools when succession arises. The likelihood of a successful principal succession is greatly enhanced when district personnel consider the characteristics of the school and obtain input from the faculty as to the type of leadership needed at the school. The successful succession of Fredrick at Langford and Vincent at Truman was due to the leadership styles of these two rather than a careful consideration of the school's characteristics and needs.

The accelerated school process "requires a very different style of leadership than traditional schools" (Accelerated Schools Fall/Winter 1997, p. 13). The succession practices that many school districts presently use results in the selection of individuals who make it through the screening process often times sharing the administrators' goals and values, but not the school's. School districts should be encouraged to become aware of the needs of a restructured school and change the selection process in order "to sustain, and even improve, leadership, not...cause...disruption, uncertainty, and dismantling of progress" (Driver & Levin, 1997, p. 17).

To work effectively in a restructured school, a successor principal needs to attend the formal training offered by the restructuring model and needs to have the leadership skills to accept and take advantage of the on-the-job training. Of the seven principals involved in this study, only Russell, Fredrick, and Vincent attended the entire training. Miller completed part the training. Generally the successor principal spends the first year learning the process. The time and effort spent by the teachers in training and acquainting a new principal with the accelerated schools process puts the process on hold; time that could be more productively used in moving the school forward.

A new principal who does not understand or share the philosophy of the reform model can produce disastrous results. When a new principal arrives, the faculty has to take the time to train that person. Thus, the progress of the school is put on hold while this on-the-job training takes place. Much of the momentum is lost and may not necessarily be regained.

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